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# Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education

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# Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education

by

Kimberly McMurtry

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Computing Technology in Education

College of Engineering and Computing  
Nova Southeastern University

2016

We hereby certify that this dissertation, submitted by Kimberly Mcmurtry, conforms to acceptable standards and is fully adequate in scope and quality to fulfill the dissertation requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Nova Southeastern University

2016

An Abstract of a Dissertation Submitted to Nova Southeastern University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy

Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education

by  
Kimberly McMurtry  
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**Abstract**

In the context of continuing growth in online higher education in the United States, students are struggling to succeed, as evidenced by lower course outcomes and lower retention rates in online courses in comparison with face-to-face courses. The problem identified for investigation is how university instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening in their online courses. The research questions were:

1. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education according to current research?
2. How do exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education?
3. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education?

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and describe the teaching practices of exemplary online faculty, and “exemplary” was defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years. A purposeful sampling strategy identified four exemplary online instructors, who taught in different disciplines at different institutions in the United States. Data collection included a pre-interview written reflection, a semi-structured telephone interview, examination of a course syllabus and other course materials, and observation of a course. Data analysis included repeated close reading and coding of all data collected and then reducing the codes to a manageable number of themes.

Two key themes emerged in the findings: human connection and organized structure. Exemplary online instructors seek to connect with students so students know and feel the care, support, and respect of the instructor. Exemplary online instructors also maintain a clearly structured environment that is logically organized, delivered in small chunks, and sufficiently repetitive to keep each student focused on the content.

These results contribute to the body of knowledge by allowing online faculty to learn from the best online faculty. First-time online faculty as well as online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy may be able to enhance teaching and learning in their courses, which in turn will hopefully yield higher student satisfaction and lower attrition in online education.

## **Acknowledgments**

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I am also indebted to my family, friends, professors, and colleagues for their encouragement and understanding throughout my study. Particularly, I would like to thank Dr. Don King, who supported my initial pursuit of this degree in 2000.

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Special thanks goes to the participants in my dissertation research who gave freely of their time and expertise. Thank you for your generosity.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Context**

Online enrollment in higher education has grown steadily during the last 15 years, and the rate of growth in online higher education enrollment in the United States currently exceeds the growth in overall higher education enrollment. From 2002 to 2011, online undergraduate enrollment grew annually at an average rate of 17.3%, while overall undergraduate enrollment increased by only 2.6% during the same period (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Then from 2012 to 2013, the growth of overall undergraduate enrollment was 1.2%, and online enrollments represented 73.7% of that increase (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Although enrollment in online education is increasing, online students are struggling to succeed; for example, in a 10-year longitudinal study, Tanyel and Griffin (2014) noted higher course outcomes and persistence rates for undergraduates in face-to-face classes compared to online classes. Retention in online courses in American higher education is lower than in face-to-face courses (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

In addition, faculty attitudes toward the quality of online education remain conflicted. Faculty who have not taught online may express skepticism about the quality of online education in comparison to classroom education (Allen & Seaman, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2015). In a 2012 survey of 4,500 faculty conducted by Babson and *Inside*



*Higher Ed*, nearly two-thirds said they believe that the learning outcomes for an online course are inferior or somewhat inferior to those for a comparable face-to-face course (Allen & Seaman, 2012). Chief academic officers in 2,800 institutions participating in the Online Learning (formerly Sloan) Consortium's annual surveys report little change in the last decade in faculty perception of the "value and legitimacy of online education"; 27.6% affirmed its legitimacy in 2003, reaching a high of 33.5% in 2007, but sliding back to 28% by 2014 (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 21).

Trends indicate a continuing increase in the importance of online programs to academic institutions in the United States; 71% of 2,800 institutions reported that "online education is critical" to their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 15). As more institutions expand online offerings to meet rising student demand, more faculty are needed to teach online, and more faculty are teaching online for the first time. New online instructors would benefit from training in best practices for online course facilitation, which can help faculty feel more prepared to teach online and can improve online pedagogy (Koepke & O'Brien, 2012; Vaill & Testori, 2012), but what are those best practices?

### **Problem Statement**

The problem identified for investigation is how university instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening in their online courses. Online students are struggling to succeed (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2012; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). As online education continues to grow, more faculty are needed to teach online (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Online instructors may benefit from training in

best practices for online course facilitation, which can improve online pedagogy (Koepke & O'Brien, 2012; Vaill & Testori, 2012), but what are those best practices?

The problem of how instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is occurring has been explored in current research by attempting to identify successful online teaching strategies (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013; Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Bonnel & Boehm, 2011; Cox-Davenport, 2014; De Gagne & Walters, 2010; Edwards, Perry, & Janzen, 2011; Fuller, 2012; Gerken & Grohnert, 2015; York & Richardson, 2012); however, current literature reflects a void in studies of the teaching practices of exemplary online instructors. Current studies of online instructors used participants from a single university or from a single discipline; for example, although Baran et al. (2013) studied “exemplary online teachers,” the participants were selected from a single university (p. 8). Likewise, although Gerken and Grohnert (2015) chose “experienced” online instructors from a variety of disciplines, all participants were teaching at the same university. Although the 24 participants in Bonnel and Boehm’s (2011) study represented five different schools, all were nurse educators. In addition, although some studies did include instructor participants from a variety of institutions and disciplines, due to advances in technology over time, research in effective online teaching should be updated. For example, although York and Richardson (2012) selected their six participants from a variety of universities, their interviews with the instructors were conducted in 2007. Similarly, online education has seen significant growth and change since De Gagne and Walters (2010), and although the 11 participants represented several institutions and disciplines, criteria for inclusion included only experience teaching online rather than demonstrated exemplary online teaching.

**Goal**

The goal was to build upon and extend current research related to effective teaching in online higher education, to identify the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education as demonstrated by the best online instructors. The results may be helpful to first-time online faculty as well as to online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy, which in turn will hopefully yield more effective learning, higher student satisfaction, and lower attrition in online education. The strategies gleaned may be helpful to instructional technology trainers in developing curriculum to guide online instructors also. Understanding the best practices of exemplary instructors may also help reduce faculty concerns about the quality of online education.

To address the problem of ensuring that quality teaching and learning is occurring online, the results will contribute to the body of knowledge by identifying the strategies of effective online teaching used by exemplary online instructors teaching in a variety of higher education disciplines in a variety of institutions throughout the United States. “Exemplary” will be defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were:

1. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education according to current research?
2. How do exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education?

### 3. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education?

#### **Relevance and Significance**

This study will contribute to the research literature in online higher education by identifying the teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty. Although the rate of enrollment growth in online higher education in the United States currently exceeds the rate of growth in overall higher education enrollment, online students are struggling to succeed (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Allen & Seaman, 2015). Course outcomes and retention are in online courses in American higher education are lower than in face-to-face courses (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2012; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). In addition, faculty attitudes toward the quality of online education in comparison to face-to-face education are conflicted (Allen & Seaman, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2015). Although online students are struggling to succeed online and faculty are skeptical about the quality of online education, trends indicate a continuing increase in the importance of online programs to academic institutions, so more faculty will be needed to teach online (Allen & Seaman, 2015). New online instructors can benefit from training in effective online course facilitation, which can help faculty feel more prepared to teach online and can improve online pedagogy (Koepke & O'Brien, 2012; Vaill & Testori, 2012).

Identifying the teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty is relevant to the current higher education landscape of increasing online course offerings, and it is significant in its potential to help online instructors ensure that they are employing effective strategies, which should enhance student learning and in turn improve retention in online education, since students are struggling to persist in online courses (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2012; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Although

current research has attempted to identify successful online teaching strategies (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013; Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Bonnel & Boehm, 2011; Cox-Davenport, 2014; De Gagne & Walters, 2010; Edwards, Perry, & Janzen, 2011; Fuller, 2012; Gerken & Grohnert, 2015; York & Richardson, 2012), current literature reflects a void in studies of the teaching practices of exemplary online instructors, defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years. Current studies of online instructors used participants from a single university or from a single discipline (Baran, et al., 2013; Bonnel & Boehm, 2011; Gerken & Grohnert, 2015). In addition, although some studies did include instructor participants from a variety of institutions and disciplines, due to advances in technology over time, research in effective online teaching should be updated; for example, although York and Richardson (2012) selected their six participants from a variety of universities, their interviews with the instructors were conducted in 2007.

Discovering how the best instructors teach effectively can reveal the best practices for teaching in today's online classroom, thus allowing online instructors to learn from the best. In addition to enhancing student learning and retention, providing these best practice strategies to online instructors may reduce faculty skepticism about the quality of online education, since faculty continue to express concern about online education in comparison to face-to-face education (Allen & Seaman, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2015).

## **Barriers and Issues**

A key barrier was identifying national awards presented for effective online teaching that is presented regularly by non-profit organizations. Although numerous universities present annual teaching awards to their own faculty and some for-profit businesses present online teaching awards, only one non-profit organization with such an award could be identified, the Online Learning Consortium.

In addition, although the Online Learning Consortium has recognized online teaching excellence annually since 2001 by presenting the John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education and the Excellence in Online Teaching Award, and 12 persons have been recognized with these awards since 2010, some of the awardees' outstanding achievements were in administration or other areas aside from teaching expertise. Some of the awardees, therefore, are not online instructors, so the pool of potential participants was smaller than expected.

## **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

Attempting to identify the teaching strategies of exemplary online instructors assumes first that online education is a valid teaching mode, that excellence in online teaching is possible, and that excellent online instructors exist. Another minor assumption is that online instructors can learn to be more effective, which has some evidence in current research (Koepke & O'Brien, 2012; Vaill & Testori, 2012).

The primary limitation is the number of online instructors who have been recognized by a non-profit organization for effective online teaching since 2010; only 12 persons were recognized with the John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education and the Excellence in Online Teaching Award from the Online

Learning Consortium, and some of the awardees are not online instructors. Additional limitations included the number of online instructors willing to participate, and homogeneity in gender of the participants, since all participants were female, and in type of institution, since most institutions were public universities.

Generalizability of results is limited due to the types of institutions represented by the exemplary instructors in the sample. Generalizability is also limited since most of the participants have the freedom to develop and design their own courses. Conclusions are also somewhat limited by the examination of effective online teaching from the instructor's perspective; although data collection included observations of online courses in addition to interviews with instructors, an enlightening follow-up study may be examining the teaching of exemplary online instructors from their students' perspective.

The key delimitation was the focus on online teaching award winners of only non-profit organizations. Another delimitation was that participants must have earned such an award within the last five years. Finally, award winners must be current online instructors to qualify for participation.

### **Definition of Term and Acronym**

**Community of Inquiry (CoI):** Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) model, in which the instructor is attempting to create a meaningful learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) by which learning in higher education occurs.

**Exemplary online instructor:** an online instructor recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years (Author).

## Chapter Summary

In the context of continuing growth in online higher education in the United States, students are struggling to succeed, as evidenced by lower course outcomes and lower retention rates in online courses in comparison with face-to-face courses. In addition, faculty have concerns regarding the quality of online education in comparison to face-to-face education. Trends indicate increasing institutional dependence on the development and expansion of online programs, and more students are seeking online education. The problem identified for investigation is how university instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening in their online courses.

Current research has identified best practices for online course facilitation; however, these studies have examined faculty deemed exemplary within their institutions or within their departments. No recent study has attempted to identify the best practices of exemplary online instructors from a variety of fields and institutions. The goal was to build upon and extend current research related to effective teaching in online higher education by identifying the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education as demonstrated by the best online instructors. The research questions were:

1. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education according to current research?
2. How do exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education?
3. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education?

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and describe the teaching practices of exemplary online faculty, and “exemplary” was defined as recognized with a



national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years.

### **Organization**

Chapter One provides an introduction to the context of online learning in higher education and to the significance of identifying the teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty. Chapter Two presents the knowledge base on which the study is built via a review of the current literature. Chapter Three explains the methodology, including research design and approach. Chapter Four provides the findings, including a description of each case and cross-case analysis. Chapter Five explains the conclusions, including implications of the findings and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

Although enrollment in online higher education in the United States continues to rise, online students are struggling to succeed, and retention in online courses is lower than in face-to-face courses. In addition, faculty continue to voice concern about the quality of online education in comparison to face-to-face education. The goal is to build upon and extend current research related to effective teaching in online higher education by identifying the practices of effective online instructors. A case study of exemplary online faculty was conducted to identify the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education. Chapter Two presents the knowledge base on which the study is built via a review of the current literature.

Identifying the best practices of effective online teaching may be accomplished by examining the instructor's perspective of which strategies seem to work well or by examining the student's satisfaction with particular teaching strategies. Current research has attempted to identify the best practices of effective online teaching from these two perspectives, and the results of current research of effective online teaching reflected four important strategies: visible engagement in course activities, timely response, prompt and constructive feedback, and clear communication. The following sections review the research related to these four aspects of effective teaching identified in the literature and their connection to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) community of inquiry (CoI)

model, which provided a conceptual framework for this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model, the instructor is attempting to create a meaningful learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) by which learning in higher education occurs. Cognitive presence is defined as the extent to which students and instructor “are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). Social presence refers to the extent to which students and instructor appear as real people to the other members of the community (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching presence is defined as the design and facilitation of the educational experience, usually conducted by the course instructor and reflected in three categories: instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction (Garrison et al., 2000). Garrison et al. (2000) noted that although all three elements of the CoI model are critical, teaching presence is the “binding element” that supports social presence and cognitive presence, which are “dependent upon the presence of a teacher” (p. 96).

Primary research questions in the current literature related to effective teaching in online higher education include:

- What indicators of online teaching presence do students perceive as most important (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010)?
- How does the role of instructor affect student engagement in the online learning environment (Ma, Han, Yang, & Chen, 2015)?
- How can instructors support interaction and assignment completion in students (Gerken & Grohnert, 2015)?

- How do instructors build interaction into online courses to support learning (Huss, Sela, & Eastep, 2015)?
- Which instructor behaviors enhance instructor immediacy online (Walkem, 2014)?
- Which communication factors most influence students' satisfaction with instructor interaction and learning in online courses (Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013)?
- Which instructor actions influence student satisfaction in online courses (Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010)?
- To what extent is instructor involvement necessary to achieve student satisfaction of instructor feedback and quality of teaching (Ladyshevsky, 2013)?
- What factors contribute to student dissatisfaction with online instructors (Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011)?
- Which components of teaching presence have a positive influence on student success online (Kupczynski et al., 2010)?
- What concepts, skills, and attitudes are most important for effective online teaching (De Gagne & Walters, 2010)?
- What strategies promote efficient, effective online course feedback (Bonnell & Boehm, 2011)?
- How do faculty create and maintain social presence in an online course (Cox-Davenport, 2014)?
- What factors influence interpersonal interactions in online courses (York & Richardson, 2012)?

- How do online instructors facilitate and promote a sense of empathy (Fuller, 2012)?
- What supports and what hinders online teaching and learning (Boling et al., 2012)?
- What makes online instructors exemplary (Edwards et al., 2011)?
- What are the successful practices that exemplary online instructors employ (Baran et al., 2013)?

### **Visible Engagement in Course Activities**

A key influencer of student satisfaction in online courses is the instructor's visible engagement in course activities, particularly demonstrated through interaction with students in discussion forums (Baran et al., 2013; Boling et al., 2012; Cox-Davenport, 2014; Fuller, 2012; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Ladyshevsky, 2013; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013; York & Richardson, 2012). Hodges and Cowan's (2012) mixed-methods study of key indicators of instructor presence identified four themes important to students: timely response, clear instructions, availability, and course design; discussion forum participation by the instructor was identified as a subtheme of the timely response theme.

In their quantitative study of student end-of-course evaluations of online graduate courses, Schubert-Irastorza and Fabry (2011) found that students are more satisfied with online courses when instructors appear to be actively engaged in the course; however, the researchers in this study examined only the results of end-of-course student evaluations, assuming that items receiving low scores such as "The instructor was an active participant in this class" were important to the students; students were not asked to rank

items according to importance. Ladyshevsky's (2013) case study of an online undergraduate management course revealed that "quality of teaching" positively influenced student satisfaction, and quality seemed to result from more personal interaction by the instructor, such as referring to specific students by name, and more communication by the instructor, especially in discussion forums (p. 19). Students in Ladyshevsky's (2013) study appreciated the instructor "encouraging students to reply to other student posts, pointing to excellent posts, offering comments, posing new questions and acknowledging student contributions" (p. 15). Van Tassel and Schmitz's (2013) survey research of online undergraduate and graduate students demonstrated that student satisfaction and learning are enhanced in online courses that foster interactive engagement of students and instructors; although only 63 students in 27 online courses completed the survey, survey questions asked specifically about student expectations of instructor interaction at the beginning of the course and then whether and how much those expectations were met. Baran et al.'s (2013) ethnographic study of six instructors revealed three important strategies for effective teaching related to visible engagement in the course: knowing the students, enhancing student-instructor relationships, and maintaining instructor presence. Likewise, York and Richardson's (2012) phenomenological study of six instructors identified discourse facilitation strategies such as immediacy behaviors and instructor participation, and the seven instructors in Huss et al.'s (2015) phenomenological research reported strategies to enhance instructor-student interaction, including using email, discussion forums, face-to-face meetings, and video recordings. Since Fuller's (2012) phenomenological study of 14 instructors focused on how instructors create empathy, many of the findings were related to visible engagement,

including using synchronous chat, using a conversational tone, promoting interaction through careful discussion forum facilitation, being actively present in the course, and making a personal connection at the start of class. Gerken and Grohnert's (2015) qualitative study of eight online instructors yielded recommendations to engage students and to maintain interaction, such as challenging students with provocative questions and emailing regular reminders of deadlines. Ma et al.'s (2015) quantitative study of 900 courses at a single university revealed that the instructor's role in designing activities that enhance instructor-student interaction is important to enhance student learning. Boling et al.'s (2012) phenomenological study of students and instructors revealed that effective online teaching and learning was enhanced by social interactions, and Cox-Davenport's (2014) grounded theory research of 10 instructors revealed that to create and maintain social presence, instructors sought to humanize the course.

### **Timely Response**

Another key influencer of student satisfaction in online courses is how available the instructor seems to be to the students, exhibited by the speed of response to questions raised (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Walkem, 2014). Jackson et al.'s (2010) quantitative study of undergraduate student end-of-course evaluations revealed instructor accessibility and timely response as two of the most important instructor actions in an online course.

Sheridan and Kelly's (2010) mixed methods survey study of undergraduate and graduate students found that students valued instructor responsiveness to student needs as well as timely information from the instructor. Timely response was identified as a key theme in Hodges and Cowan's (2012) qualitative study, especially prompt response to

student email. Likewise, responding promptly was an important subtheme of providing clear and timely information identified in Walkem's (2014) qualitative research of postgraduate nursing students.

### **Prompt and Constructive Feedback**

Students in online courses are more satisfied when instructors provide prompt and constructive feedback to help them understand how they are performing and how they might improve (Bonnell & Boehm, 2011; De Gagne & Walters, 2010; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Ladyshevsky, 2013; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Walkem, 2014; York & Richardson, 2012). De Gagne and Walters' (2010) phenomenological study of eleven online instructors identified the importance of strong communication skills, including providing frequent and meaningful feedback. The results of Bonnell and Boehm's (2011) phenomenological study of twenty-four instructors focused specifically on feedback, noting the importance of using the best available tools for providing feedback, having an organized system for feedback, and creating a feedback-rich environment of diverse feedback modes. Kupczynski et al.'s (2010) mixed-methods research study of online undergraduate and graduate students included an open-ended question on end-of-course evaluations regarding what the instructor did to help the student succeed, and the most valued instructor behavior was "providing feedback that helped them understand their strengths and weaknesses" (p. 30). In Schubert-Irastorza and Fabry's (2011) study of student evaluations of online courses, student responses indicated a need for timely and meaningful feedback with useful comments for improvement on assignments. The results of Ladyshevsky's (2013) case study agreed that the quality of instructor feedback positively influenced student satisfaction.



Student responses to Sheridan and Kelly's (2010) survey noted the importance of timely feedback. Likewise, providing opportune feedback was a subtheme of providing clear and timely information, noted in Walkem's (2014) study, and Ma et al.'s (2015) research identified the importance of timely feedback to enhance student engagement. York and Richardson's (2012) research identified the importance of providing a variety of types of feedback, and the instructors in Gerken and Grohnert's (2015) study recommended not only sending frequent emails to students informing them of their progress but also providing feedback on group functioning.

### **Clear Communication**

Clarity of instructor communication is key to effective online teaching (Baran et al., 2013; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2010; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013; Walkem, 2014; York & Richardson, 2012). The students in Schubert-Irastorza and Fabry's (2011) research indicated a preference for a well-organized sequence of instruction with clear explanations by the instructor. Likewise, the students in Jackson, Jones, and Rodriguez's (2010) study noted that clear expectations and instructions for assignments was one of the most important instructor actions in online courses, and instructors in York and Richardson's (2012) study affirmed the importance of providing models and guidelines with expectations. Students in Sheridan and Kelly's (2010) research valued clear course requirements, while students in Hodges and Cowan's (2012) study noted the importance of clear instructions as well as effective course design. The instructors in Gerken and Grohnert's (2015) research recommended enhancing verbal communication visually, including using graphical illustrations to stimulate discussion

and communicating task structure visually. When undergraduate and graduate students in Kupczynski et al.'s (2010) study were asked to describe the instructor action that hindered their success, the most prevalent responses behind lack of feedback were lack of clear communication of course topics and lack of clear instructions. Students in Van Tassel and Schmitz's (2013) study emphasized the value of syllabus, assignment, and schedule information, demonstrating the importance of the instructor's clear communication and instructions. Likewise, the instructors in Baran et al.'s (2013) study noted that designing and structuring the course is important to effective teaching. Finally, providing clear as well as timely information was one of the three most important instructor immediacy behaviors according to the postgraduate students in Walkem's (2014) qualitative research; the other important behaviors were acknowledging students' personal and professional responsibilities and incorporating rich media.

The four key aspects of effective online teaching identified in the current research literature reinforce Garrison et al.'s (2000) description of the three categories of teaching presence: instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction. Instructional management encompasses the instructor's efforts to provide an organized structure for the course, and recent research has affirmed the value of clear and organized instructor communication (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013; Walkem, 2014). Building understanding includes "active intervention" to facilitate learning (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 101); current research reflects the importance of the instructor's visible engagement in course activities as well as timely response to students (Gerken & Grohnert, 2015; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010;

Ladyshewsky, 2013; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013; Walkem, 2014). The third category, direct instruction, includes assessment and feedback, and current research affirms the importance of prompt and constructive feedback (Gerken & Grohnert, 2015; Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Van Tassel & Schmitz, 2013).

### **Chapter Summary**

Identifying the best practices of effective online teaching may be accomplished by examining the instructor's perspective of which strategies seem to work well or by examining the student's satisfaction with particular teaching strategies. Current research has attempted to identify the best practices of effective online teaching from these two perspectives, and the results of current research of effective online teaching reflected four important strategies: visible engagement in course activities, timely response, prompt and constructive feedback, and clear communication. Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model provides a conceptual framework for this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994); learning in higher education occurs through the development of three interdependent elements (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence), and teaching presence is the "binding element" that supports social presence and cognitive presence, which are "dependent upon the presence of a teacher" (p. 96).

As online education continues to grow in enrollment and as advancements in technology affect teaching and learning online, research in the most effective means of implementing online teaching presence will continue to be needed to ensure quality online education and to improve student success and retention. This study of exemplary

online instructors will contribute to the literature by identifying the ways in which exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence, thus identifying the best practices of effective online teaching.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Overview of Research Design**

This investigation was a qualitative research study of exemplary online faculty to identify the best practices of effective online teaching; how do exemplary online faculty enact teaching presence, and thus what are the best practices of effective online teaching? The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and describe the teaching practices of exemplary online faculty (Yin, 2009); “exemplary” was defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years. The case study approach is most appropriate, since the focus of the investigation “is on a contemporary phenomenon” within a real-life context (Yin, 2009, p. 1), and since the phenomenon of effective online teaching is so closely bound to the context within which it is situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

While quantitative research can provide some insight into what online teaching strategies are effective, qualitative research can also illuminate how and why certain strategies are more effective. As Creswell (2013) explained, qualitative research is more holistic in its approach; qualitative researchers situate themselves within the research situation, usually face-to-face with participants within the research environment, collect a variety of types of data rather than a single type, and report the varying perspectives they identify. Qualitative research can thus offer a richer picture of results than can

quantitative research. The following sections describe the research design, framed by the research questions.

### **Literature Review**

To address the first research question, identifying the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education according to current research, a thorough literature review was conducted to identify results of recent research in effective online teaching. Current research reflected four important online teaching strategies: visible engagement in course activities, timely response, prompt and constructive feedback, and clear communication.

In addition, Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model provides a conceptual framework for this research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model, the instructor is attempting to create a meaningful learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) by which learning in higher education occurs. Teaching presence is the "binding element" that supports social presence and cognitive presence, which are "dependent upon the presence of a teacher" (p. 96). The four key teaching strategies identified in current research and the description of teaching presence developed by Garrison et al. (2000) were explained in detail in Chapter 2 and informed the investigation.

### **Sample**

To address the second research question, how exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education, a purposeful sampling strategy was used to identify exemplary online instructors. The Online Learning Consortium has recognized

online teaching excellence annually since 2001 by presenting the John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education and the Excellence in Online Teaching Award, and the list of award members is publicly available; 12 instructors have been recognized with these awards since 2010, and awardees taught in a variety of disciplines at various types of institutions, including public universities, for-profit universities, and community colleges. All awardees since 2010 who continue to teach online in higher education were invited to participate via email, aiming for at least five participants who teach in various undergraduate and graduate disciplines at different types of institutions. Most of the winners of the Bourne award are leaders in the field of online education in administration, so the sample pool was smaller than anticipated.

Four instructors agreed to participate; this number falls within Creswell's (2013) description of multi-case studies: "researchers typically choose no more than four or five cases" (p. 101). All four instructors currently teach online and are female. One teaches only undergraduates, one teaches only graduates, and two teach both undergraduates and graduates. The instructors teach at three public universities and one community college, and their courses include health care policy, health care finance, health care economics, research methods, instructional design, nursing education, communication, and public speaking. The numbers of years each instructor has taught fully online courses are 15, 14, 12, and 5.

The instructors who agreed to participate were emailed a copy of the consent-to-participate form included in Appendix A, and the form was mailed with a self-addressed stamped envelope so the signed form could be easily returned. The consent-to-participate form assured participants that their names and institutions would not be revealed in the

dissertation report or in subsequent publications and noted the participants' freedom to withdraw at any time. No known risks are associated with the study, other than potential discomfort due to investment of the participants' time, which was expected to be 3-4 hours.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The use of multiple data sources is a defining feature of case study research in order to achieve in-depth understanding of the issue (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013). Data collection thus included a pre-interview written reflection on practices of effective online teaching by each participant, a semi-structured interview with each participant conducted by telephone, examination of the course syllabus and any other course materials available during observation of a course, and an observation of a completed or nearly completed online course taught by each instructor. Creswell (2013) explained that qualitative data is usually collected in the natural setting of the participants, so interviewing the instructors about their teaching strategies and then observing their courses to see how they behaved in context were important data collection points. The researcher is the key instrument (Creswell, 2013).

Each instructor first completed a pre-interview written reflection of demographic and open-ended questions, provided in Appendix B. The open-ended questions were developed to identify how each instructor enacted teaching presence in her online courses. According to Creswell (2013), questions asked in data collection should be developed to help answer the research questions, so the questions in the pre-interview reflection were intended to elicit answers to research question 2: how do exemplary



online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education? Each instructor completed the reflection online via SurveyMonkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>).

A semi-structured interview was conducted by telephone with each instructor after completion of the pre-interview reflection. Interviews took 30-60 minutes and were digitally audio-recorded and then transcribed (Creswell, 2013). A prepared interview guide sheet (Appendix C) was used during each interview; as recommended by Creswell (2013), the guide sheet included open-ended questions developed to identify how each instructor enacted teaching presence in her online courses, and space was provided for writing field notes during each interview. The questions were intended to elicit answers to research question 2: how do exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education? In addition, questions were asked as follow-up to each instructor's response to the pre-interview reflection questions. Although Creswell (2013) recommended pilot testing when possible to help refine interview questions, pilot cases were not readily available.

After each telephone interview, each instructor provided access to a completed online course, including all course materials and the course syllabus. Each course was observed for approximately one hour in an effort to understand how each instructor enacted teaching presence in her online course. Field notes were handwritten during each course observation on a prepared observation guide sheet (Appendix D; Creswell, 2013).

During data collection, one participant expressed concern about providing access to her students' names and grades in a course, so data collection was minimally adjusted in her case; instead of providing full access to a course, she provided course materials and

videos, course screen shots, examples of course announcements, and examples of student feedback.

To ensure confidentiality of personal information, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant, and the pseudonym was used throughout data collection, data analysis, and reporting (Creswell, 2013). All digital files remained secured on a personal computer, and any paper documents remained secured in the researcher's home office throughout data collection, data analysis, and report writing (Creswell, 2013); as required by Nova Southeastern University's institutional review board, all materials will be retained for three years and then destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was expected to reveal how exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in their courses and thus what are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education, answering the third research question. Guided by Creswell (2013), data analysis was an inductive process that included repeated close reading and coding of all data collected (written participant reflections, field notes from course observations, interview transcripts, and course syllabi and materials) to identify short phrases and key concepts that described how the instructor enacted teaching presence; these codes were primarily in vivo codes, exact words used by the participants, and were noted in the margins by hand (Creswell, 2013; Huberman & Miles, 1994). An example of data coding is provided as Appendix E.

The next step in data analysis was rereading all of the data to combine similar codes and thus reduce the codes to a manageable number of themes (Creswell, 2013; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Madison, 2005). For example, the codes friendly, human

element, interactive, engaging, respect, proactive, encouraging, reaching out, and warm tone were classified as the theme of human connection: demonstrating care and empathy. Two primary themes were identified with five sub-themes; these themes revealed the best practices of effective online teaching by demonstrating the strategies used by exemplary online instructors.

Findings are presented in Chapter 4 with a detailed description of each case of effective online teaching, including verbatim illustrations from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The description of each case is followed by cross-case analysis, including the themes that emerged, followed by conclusions drawn from comparison of the cases in Chapter 5 (Creswell, 2013). The conclusions revealed best practices for effective online teaching. The key themes identified are contextualized with the framework from a literature review and Garrison et al.'s (2000) description of the three categories of teaching presence (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Validation of findings was established through member checking. The researcher's role, potential bias, and influence during collection and analysis were managed by presenting each interview transcript and each case report to the participants for their review to establish credibility, and the conclusions were considered accurate by the participants (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **Resources**

Successful completion required the participation of four of the 12 Online Learning Consortium award winners since 2010 and a computer with Internet access. IRB approval from Nova Southeastern University was required and received (Appendix A).

## Chapter Summary

The problem of ensuring that effective teaching and learning is occurring online affects faculty confidence in the quality of online education and results in lower student success and retention (Allen & Seaman, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2012; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). In identifying the best practices of effective online teaching demonstrated by exemplary online instructors teaching in a variety of higher education disciplines in institutions throughout the United States, these results contribute to the body of knowledge by allowing online faculty to learn from the best online faculty. First-time online faculty as well as online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy may be able to enhance teaching and learning in their courses, which in turn will hopefully yield higher student satisfaction and lower attrition in online education. The strategies gleaned may also be helpful to instructional technology trainers in developing curricula to guide online instructors.

A purposeful sampling strategy was used in this descriptive case study. Four of the twelve award winners of the Online Learning Consortium's John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education or the Excellence in Online Teaching Award since 2010 agreed to participate. Data collection included a pre-interview written reflection, a semi-structured telephone interview, examination of a course syllabus and other course materials, and observation of a course. Data analysis included repeated close reading and coding of all data collected and then reducing the codes to a manageable number of themes. Findings are described with a description of each case followed by cross-case analysis in Chapter 4, and conclusions are provided in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

Following is a detailed description of each case of effective online teaching, including verbatim illustrations from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The description of each case is followed by cross-case analysis, including the themes that emerged, followed by conclusions drawn from comparison of the cases (Creswell, 2013). The conclusions revealed best practices for effective online teaching. The key themes identified are contextualized with the framework from a literature review and Garrison et al.'s (2000) description of the three categories of teaching presence (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

#### **Analysis of Each Case**

##### *Instructor A*

Instructor A has taught online in the field of instructional design for 15 years at the graduate level. Each course is 8 weeks in length and is conducted using Desire2Learn (D2L). Enrollment in each course is capped at 24 students, and Instructor A teaches about 100 students each semester. She writes and designs all of her online courses. Employed by a public university, she previously taught English as a Second Language in the face-to-face classroom.

A key aspect of this instructor's exemplary teaching is her one-to-one communication with each student. Her teaching approach is highly interactive. She gives specific feedback weekly to coach each student in addition to participating in the

discussion forum. She explained, “My students recognize that I am laser-focused on them and their success.” Her approach is proactive, reaching out to students to provide guidance and to help them engage in the course. She demonstrates value and respect for each student, helping them succeed academically while balancing life and work. She explained, “I let my students know from the beginning that I want them to feel challenged, but I don’t want them to feel overwhelmed and stressed...Being stressed is not conducive to learning.” For example, students are given the opportunity to take a week off from discussion once during each course.

In addition to one-to-one communication, this instructor makes all-class announcements about twice each week, sometimes pointing out new resources. Often, she uses announcements to reinforce concepts with an example or illustration. She conducts three synchronous sessions using Adobe Connect, which are optional for student participation. The first session is on the evening before the course starts to provide an opportunity to answer any questions about the course. The next sessions are around the fourth and sixth week, to provide another opportunity for students to ask questions and for the instructor to review content and to preview new content. Usually a quarter to a third of the class attend the sessions, which are recorded for students who cannot attend.

This instructor also ensures the online environment is “a place where learners want to be.” That requires an instructor who is obviously present and who communicates in a welcoming manner. She makes an effort to ensure that her communication has a natural, conversational tone and uses humor and anecdotes when appropriate. She begins each module with a video introduction, so students see and hear her regularly. Discussion groups are kept small, at 10 to 12 students, to help foster community; she notes that when

students get to know one another, conversation flows more freely, and learning occurs more easily. Students are also encouraged to use creativity in their assignments.

Also important for effective online teaching for this instructor is an organized course that moves students toward their goals. Objectives are appropriately aligned with assessments and activities. Course content is broken into small chunks so that students can feel like they are making progress in short study sessions. The chunks are logically organized, and transitions provide clear relationship between what was done, what is being done, and what will be done.

#### *Instructor B*

Instructor B is employed by a public university with a graduate school. She has taught online nursing education a total of 12 years, including 12 years of undergraduate instruction and four years of graduate instruction. Throughout her career she has used Blackboard to supplement face-to-face classroom, and then started teaching fully online classes five years ago. The courses she teaches were developed either by her or by fellow faculty, all with the assistance of instructional designers; her university provides a template for course development, but faculty enjoy freedom in course design and delivery. The enrollment in a typical online course could range from 5 to 50. Instructor B teaches 40 to 60 online students and another 120 face-to-face students each semester. Her typical online courses are semester-long, 14-15 weeks in fall and spring, and 11 weeks in the summer, and Blackboard is her learning management system.

Most important to this instructor in online teaching is an organized approach. She explained that face-to-face teaching offers an inherent structure that is absent in the online classroom, so the instructor must make more effort in developing a structured

environment. Each week should follow a logical, recurring format with elements in the same order, “so that students can expect where the assignment link will be, expect the reading link, the objectives, where the supplemental video is or supplemental reading section....That creates ease and facilitates their navigation and learning.” In addition, students are provided clear guidelines for assignments, and a rubric demonstrating expectations is provided for each type of assignment. Finally, timely feedback is important; she grades assignments within a week of submission.

Also important to this instructor is a creative approach in online teaching. She uses a combination of asynchronous and synchronous communication and a variety of teaching techniques, including polling, storytelling, debating, and incorporating humor and images when possible. For example, in her course announcements, she often includes a photo of something related to the course, such as from a conference she attended. A variety of assessment methods is also employed, including Voice Threads, written papers, presentations using PowerPoint and Adobe Connect, iMovies, and timed quizzes. She conducts live interactive sessions using Collaborate, although these sessions are usually optional, as well as virtual simulations of a clinical environment to allow students to practice on virtual patients using CliniSpace. She encourages her students to express themselves by employing a variety of means and technologies; in addition to written assignments, students record audio clips and video clips and create infographics and web pages. She requires a headset as a technology tool in her courses and encourages students to have a webcam. She has replaced the written discussion board with audio clips using Voice Thread; students post and listen to their classmates’ audio-recorded responses to prompts, and each student receives individual written feedback from the instructor.



Instructor B emphasizes the importance of actively seeking to engage students. Communication should be frequent, offering not only announcements and deadline reminders but also tips to help students along: “I am very positive and encouraging.” She sends announcements once or twice a week, often including personal anecdotes and photos. Along with frequently reaching out to students, she also responds quickly to student questions or concerns, letting students know that she is “highly available.”

This instructor emphasizes making a connection with students as an important aspect of the teaching and learning process: “When I am able to visualize students or recognize their work, then I know I have made a connection with them.” She also notes the value of synchronous sessions and recommends a live orientation at a minimum, because “the students get to hear your voice; they get to connect and ask questions and get real-time feedback.” Being friendly and trying to connect with students enhances the learning environment and increases student satisfaction; “making them see that I’m a person that’s available for them...humanizes the faculty member that they never get to see.” She seeks to be helpful rather than authoritarian, treating students with respect and being flexible when it’s warranted.

This instructor’s teaching approach varies slightly when teaching undergraduate versus graduate students, with a more rigid approach for undergrads and a more flexible approach for grads. She also notes, however, that an instructor may also adjust her approach depending on the cultural differences of various schools; for example, the culture of a technical college would be different from the culture of an ivy-league university.

*Instructor C*

Instructor C has taught communication and public speaking to undergraduates online for fourteen years. She designs and develops her own online courses. Canvas is her current learning management system. Employed by a community college, Instructor C teaches one fully online course and two to three hybrid courses each semester. Enrollment in each course is typically 28 students, with a total of 84 to 112 students each semester.

Demonstrating care and connecting with students are important to this instructor's student-centered teaching approach. She strives to ensure that her students "feel like I am there for them as much as they need me." She responds to student emails quickly, often within minutes, and describes her style as "aggressive when it comes to emailing." Instead of course announcements, she sends "letters" to her students via email several times a week, sometimes every day. She strives to make her emails sound personal, offering a lot of encouragement and including references to current events "to make it feel less sterile." Her tone is warm and caring, as in this example from a course welcome email: "If you review the materials and come across questions, please e-mail me. That's what I'm here for!" She also uses audio responses for feedback and video for instruction.

She also demonstrates care by using repetitive course modules, providing the same layout of materials each week. Each week begins with a "Read about It" assignment, usually from the textbook, followed by a "Write about It" or "In Conversation" assignment, in which students are either learning through writing or through practice conversation. Each week ends with a "Do It" assignment, which gives

students the opportunity to apply that week's concepts. Clear instructions are provided, often with examples or models to help students understand expectations.

This instructor emphasizes active teaching to encourage active learning. She aims for interactivity and engagement between instructor and students and between students. At the start of the course as students are introducing themselves, her enthusiasm and efforts to engage are evident in the personal response she writes to each student, like this one: "Welcome, [name]! What a busy lady you are and a role model for those children. You are going to gain more communication skills than you ever realized. Even small improvements/realizations pay off quickly in this field!" Instead of rote testing, assessment is conducted through application of concepts: "They have to actually do things with the content." Students are often recording videos of themselves giving a speech or leading a discussion, and they have the opportunity to peer review each other's videos.

#### *Instructor D*

Instructor D has taught health care policy, health care finance, health care economics, and research methods to graduates and undergraduates online for five years. She has taught for 30 years in the face-to-face classroom. Instructor D designs and develops her own online courses. She teaches two online courses each semester with an enrollment of 20 to 39 in each course. She is currently employed by a public university with a graduate school and uses Blackboard as her learning management platform.

Using screencasts recorded using Camtasia or Jing is an important aspect of this instructor's approach, ensuring that the instruction, although asynchronous, is not all-text. She begins each course with a video orientation, providing a tour of the course as well as

explaining common misconceptions about online learning, such as that it takes less time than a face-to-face class; her goals for the orientation are to welcome the students, to lessen the psychic distance by demonstrating her enthusiasm for the course subject, and to provide an advance organizer. She also provides a screencast review of each weekly quiz, explaining the correct answers. Individual feedback to major assignments is given via screencast review. In addition, short screencasts are provided as ancillary materials for those students who may need further explanation of concepts. These screencasts allow the instructor to convey her “deep knowledge and passion for the topic” and help students feel connected to the instructor as well as to the course material.

Another key to this instructor’s teaching style is strict organization. She explained that since the course is not spatially contained by a classroom, it needs to be temporally contained, so students can move through the course at the same time; therefore, requirements and deadlines are precise. For example, quizzes open and close at the same days and times each week, and assignments may not be submitted past their deadlines. In addition, Instructor D records and posts a weekly screencast review of each quiz, providing additional instruction in areas where many students struggled; this activity reinforces the importance of completing the quiz on time, and it also keeps the instructor focused on how well the students are learning the content. Such regular all-class specific feedback demonstrates the instructor’s concern for the students’ learning and success.

This instructor has included some synchronous sessions in courses in the past, including a welcome session and a question-and-answer session, but determined that since her students are primarily working adults, identifying a good meeting is a challenge, and perhaps students enroll in asynchronous courses because the courses are

asynchronous. She feels that she can still connect personally with students without meeting in real time, and this is likely true due to her frequency of communication via text and video.

Instructor D demonstrates care for the success of her students throughout her communications. In addition to her screencast videos, her regular course announcements reinforce the importance of scheduling enough time to dedicate to the course. She also demonstrates excitement for the course topic by reiterating in text and in videos the “fun” of the course and the relevance of the topic.

## **Findings**

Two key themes emerged: human connection and organized structure. All four participants emphasized the importance of connecting with their students in such a way that the students knew and felt the care, support, and respect of the instructor. Beyond facilitating human connection, the second most important skill of the effective online instructor is maintaining a clearly structured environment that is logically organized, delivered in small chunks, and sufficiently repetitive to keep the student focused on the content.

### *Human Connection*

In the face-to-face classroom, the instructor may use tone of voice and a variety of types of body language, such as facial expressions, stepping toward a student who is asking a question, or even placing a hand on a student’s shoulder to demonstrate empathy, care, and respect. In an online classroom, especially one that is asynchronous and may be completely text-based, the effective instructor must find other ways to demonstrate her care for the student and thus make a human connection; important

practices include demonstrating care and empathy, communicating frequently, giving frequent and specific feedback, and humanizing communication.

Exemplary online instructors demonstrate overt care and empathy for their students to show that the instructor values each student as a person. Instructor A explained that she wants students to succeed academically while balancing life and work, encouraging them to avoid stress, which is “not conducive to learning.” She noted the importance of being proactive when a student may be disengaging or falling behind in a course, reaching out to offer encouragement and guidance. She facilitates a positive learning environment by using a welcoming, natural tone. Instructor B likewise noted her efforts to be positive, friendly, and encouraging in her communications to students. She reaches out frequently to students and is “highly available” to them, responding quickly to student questions or concerns. Instructor C also wants her students to “feel like I am there for them”; she often responds to student emails within minutes. The management style of these exemplary instructors is more empathetic than authoritarian as demonstrated in a recent course wherein Instructor D confronted potential cheating; she explained the importance of knowing the material, since in health care, someone’s life may depend on the student’s knowledge, by relating a personal example in which she had to rely on her own knowledge in a life-or-death situation with a patient. Instructor D wrote to the students, “I share this because you can't begin to know what life will ask of you.... You can't always check a book for the right answer, and sometimes there is no one around to ask for help.... If you are a person who has not followed course rules, perhaps it is time to ask yourself if that is really the sort of person you want to be. Is that your best self?”

The teaching approach of effective online instructors is highly communicative, whether communication is textual or aural, and seeks to connect with every student. Three of the four instructors use synchronous online sessions, usually attendance-optional, for those students who prefer meeting the instructor in real time for class orientation, additional instruction, or answers to questions. Instructors A and D also use a lot of short instructional videos or screencasts, so students see and hear them frequently. Instructor B likewise recommends a live orientation at a minimum to give students the opportunity to “meet” the instructor and hear her voice in real time; she says that “making them see that I’m a person that’s available for them” enhances the learning environment and increases student satisfaction. Instructor D provides a video orientation to each course to welcome students and to lessen the psychic distance by demonstrating her enthusiasm for the course, as well as to serve as an advance organizer. She feels videos of the instructor help students connect to the instructor as well as to the course content. Instructor B seeks to engage her online students by using a variety of teaching techniques, such as polling, storytelling, and debating, as well as a variety of types of assessment, such as Voice Threads, written papers, PowerPoint presentations, iMovies, and timed quizzes. Likewise, Instructor C seeks the active engagement of students, requiring them to make and share videos.

Exemplary online instructors give their students frequent and specific feedback. Instructor A described this energy as being “laser-focused” on each student’s success, and the students feel her laser focus by her personal, specific, regular feedback. She uses a weekly review of quiz results to reinforce course concepts, which also communicates her care that every student understand the material and demonstrates her focus on each

student's learning. Instructor C noted the importance of providing feedback by audio and video.

All four instructors emphasized the importance of humanizing communication as much as possible by including personal examples, anecdotes, photos, or humor. Instructor B tries to include a photo with each course announcement. She also sends messages to offer tips and encouragement to help students along, in addition to regular reminders of assignment deadlines. Instructor C sends email "letters" to her students instead of course announcements, offering a lot of encouragement and personalizing them with references to current events. Instructor D includes personal examples in her course communications and mentions personal situations that may impact the course, such as her participation in a bike competition, which made her unavailable briefly by email.

### *Organized Structure*

Effective online teaching requires a clearly organized course structure with recurring activities and deadlines. This organized structure relates temporally to the schedule of activities and spatially and logically to the course content. Course content should be laid out in an orderly and logical fashion to move students toward the course goals. Assignments should be chunked into manageable pieces that students can complete in brief sessions, such as viewing a video on a lunch break. Deadlines should occur at the same time each week to help students get into a rhythm of task completion.

Instructor B explained that the face-to-face classroom offers an inherent structure that is absent in the online course, so the instructor must create that structure. In the schedule of activities, she ensures that elements are placed in a logical, recurring format, so that students can expect the placement of the reading assignment, the supplemental



videos, the quiz, and other elements. Instructor C likewise provides an organized course environment, with repetitive course modules that use the same layout each week. This clear structure is also present within Instructor B's assignments, wherein clear guidelines as well as a rubric illustrating expectations are provided. Structure is also inherent in the regularity of feedback provided; Instructor B offers timely feedback, grading assignments within one week of submission, and Instructor D posts a review of each quiz a couple of days after the quiz closes.

Instructor D emphasized the importance of strict assignment deadlines in online education. For example, quizzes in her courses open and close at specific times each week, and assignments may not be submitted late. This emphasis on deadlines keeps the students moving through the course as a group and enables the instructor to provide clear and regular, all-class feedback on quizzes and discussions.

Finally, exemplary online instructors structure their courses to allow small-group discussions to foster the development of community. Instructor A noted that discussion groups should be kept small to help students get to know one another, which helps conversation flow more freely and thus more learning to occur. Instructor D also emphasized the importance of forming small conversation groups within her classes to help students manage communication and more easily get to know one another. Instructor C incorporates video as possible in her discussion forums, giving students the opportunity to see and hear one another.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions, Implications, Recommendations, and Summary

#### Conclusions

Conclusions are discussed in response to the research questions.

#### *1. What are the Best Practices of Effective Online Teaching in Higher Education*

##### *According to Current Research?*

As explained in detail in Chapter 2, current research has identified four best practices of effective online teaching in higher education: visible engagement in course activities, timely response, prompt and constructive feedback, and clear communication.

#### *2. How do Exemplary Online Instructors Enact Teaching Presence in Higher Education?*

In Garrison et al.'s (2000) CoI model, teaching presence is the “binding element,” since social presence and cognitive presence are “dependent upon the presence of a teacher” (p. 96). Teaching presence is defined as the design and facilitation of the educational experience, usually conducted by the course instructor and reflected in three categories: instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction (Garrison et al., 2000). Instructional management encompasses the instructor's efforts to provide an organized structure for the course, and exemplary online instructors prioritize the clear and logical structure of their courses. Spatial and logical organization is accomplished in the layout of course content, moving students toward course goals using manageable chunks of instruction. Elements of the course are placed in the same location

each week, and clear assignment guidelines with expectations are provided. Temporal organization is accomplished with deadlines recurring each week, strict adherence to assignment deadlines, and prompt feedback on completed assignments. In addition, exemplary online instructors structure their classes in small discussion groups to help students manage their communication and get to know one another better.

The second category of teaching presence, building understanding, includes “active intervention” to facilitate learning (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 101), and exemplary online instructors are active participants in the learning environment. They engage students with frequent communication, using aural and visual communication in addition to text and providing ancillary materials as needed. Their communication demonstrates care and empathy for the students, and they offer frequent encouragement with a kind and positive tone. Exemplary online instructors are highly available and responsive to student requests and questions, often responding within minutes. They seek to humanize communication by including personal examples, anecdotes, photos, or humor.

The third category of teaching presence, direct instruction, includes assessment and feedback (Garrison et al., 2000), and exemplary online instructors provide frequent and specific feedback to students, privately giving students individual feedback on areas for improvement as well as publicly giving all-class feedback, which aids in reinforcing concepts. Exemplary online instructors demonstrate their care and focus on each student’s learning through their discussion of needed areas of improvement, providing prompt feedback.

### *3. What are the Best Practices of Effective Online Teaching in Higher Education?*

The best practices of effective online teaching in higher education are:

1. Foster the human connection by demonstrating care and empathy.
2. Foster the human connection by communicating frequently.
3. Foster the human connection by giving frequent, specific feedback.
4. Foster the human connection by humanizing communication.
5. Organize the course spatially and logically.
6. Organize the course temporally.

Effective online teaching in higher education fosters the human connection by demonstrating care and empathy. The instructor's teaching approach is student-centered, focusing not just on providing the content and grading the student's efforts, but also on whether each student is engaged in the learning process, understanding the content, and making progress toward the course goals. The instructor proactively reaches out to the student who may be disengaging or falling behind, to offer encouragement and assistance. The instructor cares for and respects each student. Although Cox-Davenport (2014) focused on how the instructor establishes social presence in an online course, her findings agreed that the effective instructor needs to establish a human connection in an online course, and the instructors in her qualitative study demonstrated care for and intentional outreach to students.

Effective online teaching fosters the human connection by communicating frequently. The instructor thus demonstrates presence and active engagement in the course, and Schubert-Irastorza and Fabry's (2011) research agreed that students are more satisfied with online courses when the instructor is actively engaged. Baran et al.'s (2013) and Fuller's (2012) studies likewise emphasized the importance of maintaining instructor presence through frequent communication; Fuller (2012) found that effective online

instructors had “very heavy email contact” with students (p. 44). Student questions are responded to quickly, often within minutes but at least within 24 hours, which reinforces the findings of recent research, that the speed of instructor response to student questions is a key influencer of student satisfaction in online courses (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Jackson et al., 2010; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Walkem, 2014). The effective online instructor emails or posts announcements regularly, at least twice each week but sometimes more often, reinforcing the results of Ladyshevsky’s (2013) case study of an online undergraduate management course, which revealed that frequent communication by the instructor positively influenced student satisfaction. Synchronous online sessions may be used to provide students real-time access to the instructor for course orientation, instruction, or answers to questions.

Effective online teaching fosters the human connection by giving frequent, specific feedback. The instructor’s approach is again student-centered in its focus on guiding the individual by providing personal feedback, which may be written, aural, or by screencast video. Feedback is given frequently to help students understand how improvements may be made before submitting the next assignment. Feedback is all-class in addition to personal, which provides additional opportunities to teach and to reinforce concepts, agreeing with Bonnel and Boehm’s (2011) and York and Richardson’s (2012) findings, which noted the importance of creating a feedback-rich environment of diverse feedback modes. Current research agrees that students in online courses are more satisfied when instructors provide prompt and constructive feedback (Bonnel & Boehm, 2011; De Gagne & Walters, 2010; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Ladyshevsky, 2013;

Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Walkem, 2014; York & Richardson, 2012).

Effective online teaching fosters the human connection by humanizing communication. The instructor infuses the cold learning environment of the computer screen with the warmth of personal examples, anecdotes, photos, or humor. These tidbits of real life help the students feel the presence of a human instructor. Boling et al.'s (2012) study revealed that effective online teaching and learning was enhanced by social interactions; examples included being able to hear the instructor's voice in audio feedback and being able to interact with other students in live sessions using Wimba. Likewise, Cox-Davenport's (2014) grounded theory research of 10 instructors revealed the importance of the online instructor's efforts to humanize the course, including the use of personal examples to illustrate concepts and build collegiality.

Effective online teaching organizes the course spatially and logically. Course modules are organized clearly and repetitive in structure, using the same layout with items in the same order each week. Guidelines for assignments are clearly described with detailed explanations of how assignments will be evaluated, often with a rubric. Current research emphasizes the importance of a well-organized course; the students in Schubert-Irastorza and Fabry's (2011) study indicated a preference for a well-organized sequence of instruction. Likewise, the students in Hodges and Cowan's (2012) study noted the importance of effective course design, including allowing enough time for assignment completion and providing learning modules with sufficient online resources. In addition, the instructors in Baran et al.'s (2013) study noted that designing and structuring the course is important to effective online teaching.

Effective online teaching organizes the course temporally. Assignments are due on the same day each week, and deadlines are strictly adhered to. Temporal structure is also emphasized in the regularity of communication and feedback, such as a weekly video introduction by the instructor posted on the first day of each week, or a video review of the weekly quiz posted two days after the quiz closes.

### **Implications**

Most of the best practices identified in the results reinforce the findings of current research: effective online instructors foster the human connection by communicating frequently, foster the human connection by giving frequent, specific feedback, foster the human connection by humanizing communication, and organize the course spatially and logically (Baran et al., 2013; Boling et al., 2012; Bonnel & Boehm, 2011; Cox-Davenport, 2014; De Gagne & Walters, 2010; Hodges and Cowan, 2012; Kupczynski et al., 2010; Ladyshevsky, 2013; Schubert-Irastorza & Fabry, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Walkem, 2014; York & Richardson, 2012). Exemplary online instructors engage in two key strategies not emphasized in current literature: foster the human connection by demonstrating care and empathy, and organize the course temporally; therefore, instructors seeking to improve the teaching and learning in their online courses can focus on enhancing these two strategies. Instructors should focus on developing a human connection in their online courses by demonstrating concern for the individual student as a whole person, while at the same time setting clear and specific deadlines and holding to those deadlines so that students move together through the learning objectives as a group.

A key implication, however, is that instructors need enough time to foster the human connection with their online students. Instructors who are required to teach too

many courses and/or too many students may struggle to give each student enough focus to build a connection. Although some course enrollments were large, up to 50 students, two of the four instructors in this study taught only one or two fully online courses per semester.

### **Recommendations**

The teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty should be used as curricula in training online instructors to help ensure that they are employing effective strategies, which should enhance student learning and in turn improve retention in online education, since students are struggling to persist in online courses (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2012; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Since the strategies identified were gleaned from exemplary online instructors, faculty skepticism about the quality of online education in comparison to face-to-face education may be reduced (Allen & Seaman, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2015).

As online education continues to grow in enrollment and as advancements in technology affect teaching and learning online, research in the most effective means of teaching online will continue to be needed to ensure quality online education and to improve student success and retention. An important follow-up would investigate the perceptions of the students of effective online instructors. Although the strategies of fostering the human connection and organizing the course reflect the instructors' perspectives of which strategies seem to work well, whether these strategies are important to students was not examined. Without examining student perceptions of instructor strategies, student satisfaction cannot be determined.



## Summary

In the context of continuing growth in online higher education in the United States, students are struggling to succeed, as evidenced by lower course outcomes and lower retention rates in online courses in comparison with face-to-face courses. In addition, faculty have concerns regarding the quality of online education in comparison to face-to-face education. Trends indicate increasing institutional dependence on the development and expansion of online programs, and more students are seeking online education. Training in best practices for online course facilitation can improve online pedagogy as well as student outcomes, but what are the best practices of online course facilitation? The problem identified for investigation is how university instructors can ensure that effective teaching and learning is happening in their online courses.

Current research has identified best practices for online course facilitation; however, these studies have examined faculty deemed exemplary within their institutions or within their departments. No recent study has attempted to identify the best practices of exemplary online instructors from a variety of fields and institutions. The goal was to build upon and extend current research related to effective teaching in online higher education by identifying the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education as demonstrated by the best online instructors. The research questions were:

1. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education according to current research?
2. How do exemplary online instructors enact teaching presence in higher education?
3. What are the best practices of effective online teaching in higher education?

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to understand and describe the teaching practices of exemplary online faculty, and “exemplary” was defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years. A purposeful sampling strategy identified four exemplary online instructors, who taught in different disciplines at different institutions in the United States. Data collection included a pre-interview written reflection, a semi-structured telephone interview, examination of a course syllabus and other course materials, and observation of a course. Data analysis included repeated close reading and coding of all data collected and then reducing the codes to a manageable number of themes.

Two key themes emerged in the findings: human connection and organized structure. Exemplary online instructors seek to connect with students so students know and feel the care, support, and respect of the instructor. Exemplary online instructors also maintain a clearly structured environment that is logically organized, delivered in small chunks, and sufficiently repetitive to keep each student focused on the content.

In identifying the best practices of effective online teaching demonstrated by exemplary online instructors teaching in a variety of higher education disciplines in institutions throughout the United States, these results contribute to the body of knowledge by allowing online faculty to learn from the best online faculty. First-time online faculty as well as online faculty who seek to improve their online pedagogy may be able to enhance teaching and learning in their courses, which in turn will hopefully yield higher student satisfaction and lower attrition in online education. The strategies

gleaned may also be helpful to instructional technology trainers in developing curricula to guide online instructors.

## Appendix A

## Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board Approval



NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
Institutional Review Board

## MEMORANDUM

To: Kim McMurtry, MA  
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences

From: Cristina Garcia-Godoy, D.D.S., M.P.H., C.C.R.P.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Date: April 23, 2015

Re: *Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education* – NSU IRB No. 04131513Exp.

I have reviewed the revisions to the above-referenced research protocol by an expedited procedure. On behalf of the Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University, *Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education* is approved in keeping with expedited review category #6 and #7. Your study is approved on **April 22, 2015** and is approved until **April 21, 2016**. You are required to submit for continuing review by **March 21, 2015**. As principal investigator, you must adhere to the following requirements:

- 1) **CONSENT:** You must use the stamped (dated consent forms) attached when consenting subjects. The consent forms must indicate the approval and its date. The forms must be administered in such a manner that they are clearly understood by the subjects. The subjects must be given a copy of the signed consent document, and a copy must be placed with the subjects' confidential chart/file.
- 2) **ADVERSE EVENTS/UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS:** The principal investigator is required to notify the IRB chair of any adverse reactions that may develop as a result of this study. Approval may be withdrawn if the problem is serious.
- 3) **AMENDMENTS:** Any changes in the study (e.g., procedures, consent forms, investigators, etc.) must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
- 4) **CONTINUING REVIEWS:** A continuing review (progress report) must be submitted by the continuing review date noted above. Please see the IRB web site for continuing review information.
- 5) **FINAL REPORT:** You are required to notify the IRB Office within 30 days of the conclusion of the research that the study has ended via the IRB Closing Report form.

The NSU IRB is in compliance with the requirements for the protection of human subjects prescribed in Part 46 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46) revised June 18, 1991.

Cc: Dr. Gertrude Abramson  
Dr. Ling Wang  
Mr. William Smith

### Email Invitation to Participate

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student in computing technology in education at Nova Southeastern University, and I write to invite you to participate in my dissertation research on effective teaching practices in online higher education.


This case study will contribute to the research literature in online higher education by identifying the teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty. "Exemplary" is defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years. Discovering how the best instructors teach effectively can reveal the best practices for teaching in today's online classroom, thus allowing instructors to learn from the best, which may also reduce faculty skepticism about the quality of online education as well as enhance student learning and improve retention in online education.

As the [year] winner of the Online Learning Consortium's [award], you have been recognized as an exemplary online instructor. Would you help me in my research study? Your participation is expected to require not more than four hours of your time and will include:

1. Answering some reflection questions via an online survey;
2. Participating in a telephone interview so I can ask some follow-up questions;
3. Sharing one (or more) of your online course syllabi;
4. Allowing me to observe one of your in-process or completed online courses; and
5. Reviewing the transcript of the interview and my findings for accuracy.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your response and hope for the opportunity to learn from you.

Kim McMurtry

  
NOVA UNIVERSITY  
Institutional Review Board  
Approval Date: APR 22 2015  
Continuing Review Date: APR 21 2016

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences



NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY  
Institutional Review Board  
Approval Date: APR 22 2015  
Continuing Review Date: APR 21 2016

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled  
"Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education"

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #:

Principal investigator:  
Kim McMurtry, M.A.  
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For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:  
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)  
Nova Southeastern University  
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790  
[IRB@nsu.nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nsu.nova.edu)

Site: Data for this study will be collected by telephone and online.

**What is the study about?**

You are invited to participate in a research study. This case study will identify the teaching strategies of exemplary online faculty. Discovering how the best instructors teach effectively can reveal the best practices for teaching in today's online classroom, thus allowing instructors to learn from the best. Identifying these strategies may also reduce faculty skepticism about the quality of online education as well as enhance student learning and improve retention in online education.

**Why are you asking me?**

For this study "exemplary" is defined as recognized with a national award for effective online teaching from a non-profit organization within the last five years. All 12 winners of the Online Learning Consortium's John R. Bourne Outstanding Achievement Award in Online Education and Excellence in Online Teaching Award since 2010 who continue to teach online in higher education will be invited to participate, aiming for at least five participants.

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Page 1 of 3

**What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?**

Your participation is expected to require not more than four hours of your time and will include:

1. Answering some reflection questions via an online survey;
2. Participating in a telephone semi-structured interview so I can ask some follow-up questions;
3. Sharing with me one (or more) of your online course syllabi;
4. Allowing me to observe one of your in-process or completed online courses; and
5. Reviewing the transcript of the interview and my findings for accuracy.

**Is there any audio or video recording?**

This research project will include digital audio recording of the telephone interview. This audio recording will be available to be heard by the researcher, the IRB, the dissertation chair, and the transcriber. The recording will be transcribed by the researcher. The recording will be kept securely on the researcher's personal computer. The recording will be kept for three years following the study and permanently deleted after that time. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described in this paragraph.

**What are the dangers to me?**

No known risks are associated with this study, although you may experience minimal discomfort due to your investment of time.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

No direct benefits are associated with this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the IRB and the dissertation chair may review research records. Although the dissertation report will note that participants were honorees of awards presented by the Online Learning Consortium, your name and the name of the institution(s) for which you teach will not be mentioned in the dissertation report or in any publications or presentations associated with this research study.

**What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you choose to withdraw from the study, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for three years from the conclusion

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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of the study and may be used as a part of the research. If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigator.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing below, you indicate that

- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study-related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled "Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education"

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

  
 NOVA COLLEGE  
 Institutional Review Board  
 Approval Date: APR 22 2015  
 Continuing Review Date: APR 21 2016

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix B

### Pre-Interview Reflection Questions

#### Demographic Information

1. How many years have you been teaching online undergraduate courses?
2. How many years have you been teaching online graduate courses?
3. What is your subject area?
4. What courses do you teach?
5. Have you taught in the face-to-face undergraduate or graduate classroom? If so, for how many years?
6. For what type of institution(s) do you currently teach online (choose all that apply):
  - community college
  - four-year college or university
  - graduate school
  - public university system
  - private institution
  - for-profit institution

#### Reflection

1. How do you define effective online teaching? What does it mean to you?
2. How do you know you're teaching effectively online?
3. What makes your online teaching exemplary? What do you do that others may not be doing?
4. What strategies are essential to teaching effectively online?
5. If you could give one tip for teaching effectively to other online instructors, what would it be?
6. What else would you like to say about how you teach online? (optional)

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

Project: Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education

Interviewer: Kim McMurtry

Date of interview:

Beginning time of interview:

Ending time of interview:

Interviewee:

Title/position of interviewee:

1. Review the purpose of the study.
2. Questions:
  - a. You were honored with an award for exemplary online teaching; what do you do that makes your teaching exemplary?
  - b. Review and ask follow-up questions to the pre-interview reflection questions.
  - c. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about how you teach online?
3. Thank and assure the interviewee of confidentiality of responses. Explain next steps in data collection, including online course observation.

## Appendix D

## Observation Guide

## Project: Effective Teaching Practices in Online Higher Education

Observer: Kim McMurtry

Date of observation:

Beginning time of observation:

Ending time of observation:

Learning management system:

Course:

Screen shot of course opening page:

[illegible]

## Appendix E

## Data Coding Sample

Student -  
Student  
Comparison  
Individual  
Feedback

picture and then you get to hear the three-minute recording, but then the next student's recording will automatically pop up, and students get to hear each other's thoughts on the issue at hand, so they not only have to develop their response, they have to listen to everyone else's, and then they get individualized feedback in the grade center from me.

**OK. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about how you teach online?**

organized  
varied  
assessment  
creative  
highly  
responsive  
clear  
explanation

To summarize I think the key to online instruction is, well, there are many keys. My tips to people who would ask me how to be successful would be to be organized and don't overload them with discussion boards - maybe two maximum per course. That cannot be the only means of assessment in your course. To use pictures and attend to the visual learners. To integrate some humor. Put in some video clips. Be creative. Use multiple methods. Be timely in your feedback; you should probably get everything back to them within a week. Be highly responsive to email; make sure you return emails within 24 hours or if you can't, make sure to let them know that you will be getting back to them soon. Or if you choose not to respond to emails quickly, make that very clear in the syllabus and go over that in orientation. I think a strong orientation is important since it sets the tone. I think you've got to just genuinely be nice and have a helpful approach rather than an authoritarian approach. Be flexible when it's warranted. I think most online students - at least this is my context - this life is just so challenging and people are pulled in so many directions with working full-time and having children and having more and more expectations, so if and when they need a break, I think you should give it to them. But then again when you see patterns, then you need to treat them respectfully as an adult but just lay down the law about what's going to happen the next time they're late. I think it is good to blend the video conferencing with the asynchronous; I think that adds the human element and for those who really need that social aspect of learning, it really helps. Not everyone should be forced to do it. And when you do the live video conferencing, make sure you're not lecturing, make sure it's interactive, that you're constantly asking questions, having your students type in their answer or verbalize their answers, because that makes it a lot more engaging and interesting. I think that's a frequent mistake, that faculty think they're supposed to just get up there and lecture. Another thing we do in our courses, we do have the voiceover PowerPoints to students can get that lecture if they want it. I'm all over the place with this one.

humor  
timely  
feedback  
friendly  
approach

respect  
human  
element  
interactive

engaging  
interesting

**No it's great. Thank you. One more question: how many weeks is your typical online course? Is it semester-long?**

It's a semester. 11 weeks for summer, 14 to 15 weeks for fall and spring.

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